

Isaiah 55

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[0 : 00] We're going to do that now as well as this evening. And this is one that a lot of people don't like. It challenges our own thoughts that we are sovereign.

But Christian faith is intimately connected to God's sovereignty and to our understanding of God's sovereignty. And by Christian faith, I don't simply mean conversion faith, the moment you believe, although that is the case also.

But the faith that somebody who's already a Christian lives in every single day, how a person deals with life, these are connected to our understanding of God's sovereignty, his sovereign nature. Faith, genuine faith, is a bit like what you all are doing right now sitting in the pews. By which I mean that you trust that those pews will hold you.

Genuine faith is not simply agreeing with the thought that yes, that pew there will hold me if I were to sit, but then not sitting down on it. That's not faith.

[1 : 07] Genuine faith is not merely squatting over the pew so it looks like you're sitting on it, but you're not actually trusting it with your weight. Genuine faith has to do with casting your whole weight onto that pew so that if it falls, if it cracks and crumbles, so will you.

You'll get hurt. But you do it anyway because you trust that that pew will hold you. That's faith. Or a picture of faith. Faith in God is something similar.

True faith. True trust has to do with casting the full weight of our lives. Every aspect of our lives. Everything about us. Casting the full weight onto God to hold us up. So that if God falls, we will fall. We will crumple. We will get hurt. Our life will be destroyed if God fails. That is true faith, though. Casting ourselves and building our lives around him in such a way that we only stand because he stands.

[2 : 17] Now, it's that kind of faith, wholehearted, full faith, that God deserves. And to not give it to him, to withhold our whole life or to withhold parts of our life, in a sense, to squat so that if the pew falls, we still remain up because we're really holding ourselves up.

That type of faith in God, it dishonors him. It doesn't understand how strong he is. And it doesn't understand how good he is.

It also doesn't understand that God has a right over us. The right to be trusted. So, to cultivate this type of faith, or to start it, to establish it in your life, if you have never experienced this type of trust in God, this morning, we're going to contemplate God's sovereignty, his power, his ability, his right. And to do that, we're going to focus on a particular question. And we're going to look throughout Scripture, not just at one text, but all over the place in the Bible. And this question will be in the back of our minds as we explore God's nature.

This is the question. Is anything off limits to God? Is anything off limits to God? Is any aspect of our lives off limits to him?

[3 : 47] To God's participation? Is anything in the entire creation off limits to God? His interaction, his guidance, God's governing.

Is anything off limits? Is anything off limits to God's nature? The way we're going to contemplate that from the Scripture is through two basic points. The first one will be quite brief, and then we'll dwell on the second one for a while.

The two basic things are this. First, we'll look at God's right to rule over everything. Because he is the creator. So, we'll look at that for a moment.

God's right to rule, to be sovereign. And then we're going to spend a bit more time looking at some particulars of God's control over various aspects of life.

In fact, God's sovereign control over all things. We're going to look at what the Scripture has to say about that. So first, it's simply God's right to rule. I'm going to read a number of Scriptures.

[4 : 48] We're going to turn to a few. But for most of them, just listen. Just hear what God says through his word. God's right to rule over everything he has created.

Psalms 24 says this, To the Lord belongs the earth and everything in it, the world and all who live in it, because he founded it upon the seas and he established it upon the waters.

It belongs to him because he created it. Paul says something very similar recorded in Acts as he's talking to the Athenians in Greece.

Paul says this, The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, is the sovereign of heaven and earth. Or you could think about Isaiah.

Throughout the book of Isaiah, it is rich with two particular themes. It's rich with a lot, of course, but two particular things for us to listen to right now.

[5 : 51] God created everything and therefore God is the ruler of it. Let me just pull out a few things that Isaiah says. And he says these over and over.

God says, It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. I am the Lord and there is no other. I formed the light and I created the darkness.

I bring prosperity and I create disaster. I, the Lord, do all these things. Or again in Isaiah, The Lord Almighty has purposed.

And who can thwart him? Who can frustrate him? His hand is stretched out. Who can turn it back? God says, My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

All of these things are based on the fact that God alone is the creator. There is no God besides him. He has a right to do with his creation what he sees fit.

[6 : 59] It's a bit like an artist. An artist creates this beautiful picture, but it's the artist's. And he owns it. And he can change it. He can add things.

He can take away. He can destroy the piece of art. He can improve it. The artist has the right over his creation. Now, I mentioned that illustration to somebody one time, after church, just sitting in the back there.

And he said, Yes, but artists give their artwork to others. And once they do that, like to a museum, it's out of their control. And they don't have the control over their artwork anymore.

So the question really comes, Has God ever done that? Has God ever given anything that he created into the hands of somebody else and said, I won't interfere?

I won't interact with that? What we're going to see is, No, not at all. God has never given up the right to interact with, to rule over anything that he has created.

[8 : 05] So did God create it? Well, therefore, he rules over it. And he can do anything with it. Well, that's the first point. That's sort of a foundation of understanding God's sovereignty.

He created it. Therefore, he rules it. And he has a right over it. So our question remains, Is there actually anything that is off limits to God?

All right, well, let's look at some particular examples of what God does, what God has done in his world, in various parts of his world. And hopefully this will begin to enlarge our understanding of what God is capable of doing and what God will do.

So God's sovereign control over all things. First thing, God's control over nature. Now, I'm only going to pull a few things from Scripture for each of these points.

It's all over the place. And so I would challenge you to read the Bible with your eye trained to see what God is doing and what God is able to do. God's control over nature, over weather.

[9 : 20] As Job, or as it says in Job, as Elihu says to Job, at God's direction, snow, rain, storms, swirl around the face of the whole earth and do whatever he commands them.

He brings the clouds to punish men or to water his earth and show his love. Listen to this, Job. Stop and consider God's wonders. Weather.

Yet at the same time, the Bible, various places, is it understands the, you could call it the natural cycle of weather. That rain falls, but rain goes back up to the clouds.

We would call this the weather cycle now. The Bible understands the natural process. And yet at the same time, it says God's in control of this. God's acting through it.

How about plants? Plants. Isaiah says, a voice says, cry out. And I say, well, what shall I cry out?

[10 : 22] All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Surely people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of God falls on them. And various other places in scripture, it claims that God is the one who causes plants and various things in creation to wither.

Yet at the same time, the Bible understands that plants wither when the sun scorches them. It has an understanding of nature. It's not ignorant.

But yet it also claims that God is doing this. God claims that he's doing this. Or plants growing.

Here's another one. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

Now, in Paul's day, in Jesus' day, they had a fairly good understanding of botany. If you read some of their scientific texts, they have quite an in-depth view of what goes on in plants and in other things in nature.

[11 : 40] It's not that they were ignorant of what we would call the natural order of things, of how a plant grows. Yet, it is God who gives the growth. This could be said about so many things.

Life. Scripture says that God knits humans together in the womb. Death. Death. Death. God withdraws breath from beings, both animals and plants, and they die.

You see, even if science can explain how these things happen, as people back then could also, God was still working through the process.

Now, that's important for us, and particularly in this day, for a number of reasons. One is, when we hear claims like Richard Dawkins' claim.

Richard Dawkins is a notable atheist, a scientist, but an atheist, who wrote the book, *The God Delusion*. Well, one of the basic arguments in his whole book, and a lot of people agree with his book, one of the basic arguments is, if it's natural, therefore it's not God.

[12 : 55] So his whole book, he thinks that if he can explain the natural process of something, therefore, I've proven that God is not doing anything. Therefore, there's probably no God at all.

But do you see the problem with that? He's not criticizing the Bible's view, the biblical view of things. Even if he can explain the natural process of things, that doesn't criticize in any way what the Bible actually claims.

That yes, there is a natural process, and that God is acting in it. His whole argument really falls very short of what the Bible actually says.

His view also can't account for those times when something extra natural does happen. For example, when Jesus says to the storm, the waves and the wind, silence, and they immediately stop.

Now that's a historical fact. This is an eyewitness account that we read about this. This is something that people saw happen. Jesus said, stop, and the wind and waves stopped. But a view like Richard Dawkins can't account for historical facts like these.

[14 : 08] Or like when Jesus says to a perfectly healthy tree wither, and the tree withers. Again, another historical account, another eyewitness account, that doesn't fit into somebody like Dawkins' godless view, but that makes perfect sense in the biblical view that God is sovereign over nature.

The natural processes as well as the extra natural things. God is completely sovereign over nature. So that's one thing to keep in mind. Another is this.

Not just nature, but God's control over kings. Have you thought about this before? A general principle is stated in Proverbs.

Proverbs 21.1 says this, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a water course wherever he pleases. Now that's a general principle of God's sovereignty over a king.

Let me read a few concrete examples, you could say. Some examples in the scripture where God actually does that. So you can see it fleshed out in a very real way.

[15 : 23] One of them is Exodus chapter 7 about Pharaoh. Now we're going to focus a bit on that passage tonight, so I'm not going to go in any detail. I'll simply read a few verses.

God says to Moses, you are to say everything I command you and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country, but I myself will harden Pharaoh's heart and though I multiply miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you.

I myself will harden his heart and he will not listen to you. Again, we're going to look more at that tonight, but one thing to note is that in that whole narrative, Exodus 4 through 14, God not only hardens Pharaoh's heart, the king's heart, but he also hardens the hearts of his officials as well as the ordinary Egyptians.

But the point for right now is that God has control over kings. Another example, in Deuteronomy, Moses is reminding the Israelites of all that God has done for them throughout their wanderings through the wilderness and he reminds them of this particular instance right here.

Moses sent messengers saying to Sion, king of Heshbon, sell us food to eat, water to drink for their price in silver. Only let us pass through on foot until we cross the Jordan into the land the Lord our God is giving us.

[17:03] But Sion, king of Heshbon, refused to let us pass through for the Lord, your God, had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands as he has now done.

That's quite a claim, isn't it? That God made that king's heart stubborn so that he would not let the Israelites through, so that he could give him into their hands.

That's God's sovereignty that the Bible portrays, God's control over kings. Is there anything off limits to God? Not nature, certainly not the hearts and decisions of kings, nations.

But also God has control over nations, whole nations. What do we read? Well again, there's a general principle and then there are some examples in scripture.

A general principle in Psalm 22, verse 28, dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations. Or in Job, a similar principle, God makes nations great and he destroys them.

[18:18] He enlarges nations and he leads them away. So for you to contemplate how does God do those things? What would it take for him to make a nation great or to diminish a nation?

Well here's some concrete examples of this in scripture. In Deuteronomy again, Moses is saying, the Lord said to me, do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war for I will not give you any part of their land.

I have given our to the descendants of Lot as a possession. Now that, that might be striking for some of us. It might catch us off guard.

We're used to thinking of God giving land and possession to Israel and we probably forget that it's not only Israel that God is sovereign over. God says here, he gave land to the Moabites and he's not letting the Israelites have that land.

Or again, we read in Malachi something else that God is sovereign over regarding nations. This is about Edom, the descendants of Esau. I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.

[19:39] Now that's God's judgment on Edom. We'll look at that tonight also. But the thing I want to draw your attention to is God says that he left Edom's inheritance to the desert jackals.

Again, we're used to thinking of God giving an inheritance to Israel. But God says here that it's not only Israel that he is interacting with. He has given an inheritance to Edom as well.

God is much bigger than simply the God of Israel though he does interact through Israel in a very important and distinctive way.

But he's much bigger. In fact, he's sovereign over all nations. As Jeremiah says, Jeremiah records God saying this, with my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it and I give it to anyone I please.

Now I will hand all your countries, he's talking to Israel, I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. I will make even the wild animals subject to him.

[20:52] All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time, the appointed time, for his land comes. And when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt, declares the Lord.

Do you see God's sovereignty over all nations? In fact, Daniel, who we read about in the Old Testament, Daniel was an eyewitness of those very events, of Nebuchadnezzar being given everything, and then seventy years later, Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, God taking things away from him.

Let me read to you Daniel 5, and you can turn to this one, this is a more lengthy passage. Daniel 5, Daniel comes right after Ezekiel, excuse me, Daniel 5, it's on page 889 in your pew Bibles, starting in verse 18, so that's actually page 890.

Many of you have probably heard of this, the writing on the wall, a hand suddenly appeared and wrote something on the wall in front of the king of Babylon, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, but he didn't know what it meant.

He called in Daniel, who had been given the gift to understand things like this, and this is what Daniel says to the king, starting in verse 18, O king, the most high God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar, father just means ancestor, he was actually his grandfather, gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.

[22 : 59] Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death. Those he wanted to spare, he spared.

Those he wanted to promote, he promoted. And those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.

He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal. He lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the most high God is sovereign.

Sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes. But you, his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

Instead you have set up yourself against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them.

[24 : 04] You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand, but you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. This is the inscription that was written. Mene, mene, tekel, parson. This is what the words mean.

Mene, God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Perez, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple and gold chains were placed around his neck. He was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62. Can you see God's sovereignty over nations? Babylonians. So what about, well, in the book of Daniel we see the Babylonians, then the Medes and the Persians, and then we're told about the Greeks coming, led by Alexander the Great.

[25 : 25] We're told about the Romans coming. All of these, God says, are under his control. There was a movie made about Alexander the Great. I haven't seen it, but I have a feeling that they didn't talk about God leading Alexander the Great to do his will.

I doubt that very seriously, but that's indeed the case. And so what about countries today like the USA? China? Is anything off limits to God?

Nature is not, a king is not, nor the prime minister, nor the president. They're not off limits to God.

No nation is off limits. In all of these things, God interacts, God causes, God steers, God governs in whatever way he pleases.

Now this obviously does not mean that everything is rosy. It's not. But, is there anything, anything at all for us to fear with God in control?

Us, meaning those who are God's friends? So now let's turn to some particulars of life.

[26 : 42] We've looked at some of the big things. Nature, kings, nations. What about some of the particulars of life? Is anything off limits to God? I have a few scriptures here that I'm not going to read.

Let me simply summarize. guys, in 1 Kings, we are told that God makes Jerusalem strong. What does that mean? Does that mean that God had his hand in the economics?

Maybe in the minds of those planning the city's development? In the mind of buyers? In what way did God make Jerusalem strong? was his hand in foreign relations?

Many other scriptures talk about that as well. Understanding is another thing. In Daniel, again, we read that these four young men, Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, these four men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.

And Daniel could understand visions and dreams. God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and knowledge.

[27 : 56] Not just in the scriptures, the law which they had. Not just in those, but indeed in pagan religious writings. God gave them understanding in political writings, in poetic writings.

God gave them all understanding in these things. their minds are not off limits to the creator of their minds.

Blessings in life. Scripture talks all over the place about blessings being from God. Length of life. All the days ordained for us. All the days of our life have been ordained for us.

A human's days are determined. The number of his months is set by God. God has appointed the bounds that we cannot cross. How intimately is God sovereign within the lives of his creatures?

Success and failure. Scripture talks about that coming from God's hands. It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.

[29 : 05] So it's not just nations at large. Not kings, but ordinary people. God humbles, puts down one and lifts another up. A human's steps are directed by the Lord.

How can anyone understand his own way? Many are the plans in the human's heart, but the Lord's purpose is the one that prevails. God is the one of the people who are and the Lord was with Joseph.

We read about in Genesis. The Lord was with Joseph and the Lord gave him success in everything he did. What did that mean? How did God give him success?

God does it. He's sovereign over success as well as failure. Here's another statement that's very important for us. The Lord was with Joseph. He showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.

So the prison warden put Joseph in charge. What does that mean that God is sovereign over there? The thoughts, the affections, the emotions of the prison warden.

[30 : 16] That's how God grants favor in the eyes of someone. We're drawing toward an end here.

There's one very difficult thing that the scripture says God is sovereign over. The actions of evil people. A general principle in Proverbs says, the Lord works out everything for his own ends, even the wicked for a day of disaster.

That's a general principle. Listen to this example in somebody's real life. You remember Joseph. He was sold into slavery by his own brothers.

This was a wicked act. No one would approve of their betrayal of him and selling him into slavery. And yet Joseph understands that as he thinks back about it.

He understands that as God sent me here before you to preserve life. Joseph says, you intended evil against me, but God intended it, the evil that is.

[31 : 28] God intended it for good to bring about that many people should be kept alive. And what about that ultimate injustice?

The most ultimate injustice the world has ever seen, the execution of Jesus, the one person who has ever been truly guiltless, executed, was God in control of that?

His own son being falsely accused and executed. Listen to what the early Christians pray in the book of Acts. Sovereign Lord, they prayed, you made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that's in them.

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Indeed, King Herod and Governor Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your Holy One, your Holy Servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

[32 : 39] they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. God is sovereign even when people are doing wicked things.

God is still in control. Now this is very difficult to understand but it's important for our trust in God.

God says, my word will not return to me void, it will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it and therefore all throughout the ages God's people because of his sovereignty in all of these areas of life, God's people have been able to confess things like this to their enemies.

Devise your strategies but it will be thwarted. Propose your plan but it will not stand for God is with us. Or again, God has a plan determined for the whole world.

His hand is stretched out over all nations for the Lord Almighty has purposed and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out and who can turn it back? Or again, as Paul writes, Paul writes

about the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

That's the God we serve. It's no wonder that in the face of suffering and imprisonment and beatings and difficult times, this Christian claim soars among most.

[34 : 14] This claim in Romans 8.28, we know that everything works together for good. But the verse doesn't stop there. We know that everything works together for good for those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose.

You see, all things don't work out good for everyone. All things do not turn out good simply because of some undefined fate, some impersonal fate, or some dreamer's hope.

That's not why we can claim that all things work together for good. It's because God is sovereign over everything. Now, one final note.

Part of the everything that works together according to God's purpose, part of the everything over which God is sovereign, and that he works in conformity with his purpose, with his will, is, as both Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 say, predestination.

Predestination. That's a dirty word to a lot of people. Ephesians 1 says, in Christ we were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

[35 : 50] Now, the first response of many people to the word predestination is this, but what about my free will? But is there anything off limits to the creator?

Now, we're going to examine predestination tonight in a bit more detail. God's sovereign control over the most important choice that I will ever make.

We're going to look at that a bit more tonight. That choice of coming to Jesus, of putting our whole lives on Jesus, that choice that we make, God's sovereign control over that.

We'll contemplate that more tonight. So think now as I close this with what we started with, true trust. Trust, it's not just admitting that that pew can hold you, but not sitting in it.

It's actually casting your full weight onto the pew in such a way that if it falls, you will fall. But you know it's not going to fall. Biblical trust, casting the full weight of our lives, of every aspect of our lives, onto God in such a way that if he falls, we will fall and our lives will crumble.

[37 : 19] But, the God whom we've just been exploring, will he fall? I'll close with this, simply reading a passage from Romans 8.

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those he predestined, he also called. And those he called, he also justified. And those he justified, he also glorified.

What then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died.

[38 : 33] More than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it's written, for your sake, we face death all day long.

We're considered a sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all of these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height, nor depth, nor anything else, in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Let's pray. Let's pray.